Chapter XLVIII

Surely the golden hours are turning gray And dance no more, and vainly strive to run: I see their white locks streaming in the wind - Each face is haggard as it looks at me, Slow turning in the constant clasping round Storm-driven.

Dorothea's distress when she was leaving the church came chiefly from the perception that Mr Casaubon was determined not to speak to his cousin, and that Will's presence at church had served to mark more strongly the alienation between them. Will's coming seemed to her quite excusable, nay, she thought it an amiable movement in him towards a reconciliation which she herself had been constantly wishing for. He had probably imagined, as she had, that if Mr Casaubon and he could meet easily, they would shake hands and friendly intercourse might return. But now Dorothea felt quite robbed of that hope. Will was banished further than ever, for Mr Casaubon must have been newly embittered by this thrusting upon him of a presence which he refused to recognize.

He had not been very well that morning, suffering from some difficulty in breathing, and had not preached in consequence; she was not surprised, therefore, that he was nearly silent at luncheon, still less that he made no allusion to Will Ladislaw. For her own part she felt that she could never again introduce that subject. They usually spent apart the hours between luncheon and dinner on a Sunday; Mr Casaubon in the library dozing chiefly, and Dorothea in her boudoir, where she was wont to occupy herself with some of her favorite books. There was a little heap of them on the table in the bow-window - of various sorts, from Herodotus, which she was learning to read with Mr Casaubon, to her old companion Pascal, and Keble's 'Christian Year.' But to-day opened one after another, and could read none of them. Everything seemed dreary: the portents before the birth of Cyrus - Jewish antiquities - oh dear! - devout epigrams - the sacred chime of favorite hymns - all alike were as flat as tunes beaten on wood: even the spring flowers and the grass had a dull shiver in them under the afternoon clouds that hid the sun fitfully; even the sustaining thoughts which had become habits seemed to have in them the weariness of long future days in which she would still live with them for her sole companions. It was another or rather a fuller sort of companionship that poor Dorothea was hungering for, and the hunger had grown from the perpetual effort demanded by her married life. She was always trying to be what her husband wished, and never able to repose on his delight in what she was. The thing that she liked, that she spontaneously cared to have, seemed to be always excluded from her life; for if it was only granted and not shared by her husband it might as well have been denied. About Will Ladislaw there had been a difference between them from the first, and it had ended, since Mr

Casaubon had so severely repulsed Dorothea's strong feeling about his claims on the family property, by her being convinced that she was in the right and her husband in the wrong, but that she was helpless. This afternoon the helplessness was more wretchedly benumbing than ever: she longed for objects who could be dear to her, and to whom she could be dear. She longed for work which would be directly beneficent like the sunshine and the rain, and now it appeared that she was to live more and more in a virtual tomb, where there was the apparatus of a ghastly labor producing what would never see the light. Today she had stood at the door of the tomb and seen Will Ladislaw receding into the distant world of warm activity and fellowship - turning his face towards her as he went.

Books were of no use. Thinking was of no use. It was Sunday, and she could not have the carriage to go to Celia, who had lately had a baby. There was no refuge now from spiritual emptiness and discontent, and Dorothea had to bear her bad mood, as she would have borne a headache.

After dinner, at the hour when she usually began to read aloud, Mr Casaubon proposed that they should go into the library, where, he said, he had ordered a fire and lights. He seemed to have revived, and to be thinking intently.

In the library Dorothea observed that he had newly arranged a row of his note-books on a table, and now he took up and put into her hand a well-known volume, which was a table of contents to all the others.

'You will oblige me, my dear,' he said, seating himself, 'if instead of other reading this evening, you will go through this aloud, pencil in hand, and at each point where I say `mark,' will make a cross with your pencil. This is the first step in a sifting process which I have long had in view, and as we go on I shall be able to indicate to you certain principles of selection whereby you will, I trust, have an intelligent participation in my purpose.'

This proposal was only one more sign added to many since his memorable interview with Lydgate, that Mr Casaubon's original reluctance to let Dorothea work with him had given place to the contrary disposition, namely, to demand much interest and labor from her.

After she had read and marked for two hours, he said, 'We will take the volume up-stairs - and the pencil, if you please - and in case of reading in the night, we can pursue this task. It is not wearisome to you, I trust, Dorothea?'

'I prefer always reading what you like best to hear,' said Dorothea, who told the simple truth; for what she dreaded was to exert herself in reading or anything else which left him as joyless as ever.

It was a proof of the force with which certain characteristics in Dorothea impressed those around her, that her husband, with all his jealousy and suspicion, had gathered implicit trust in the integrity of her promises, and her power of devoting herself to her idea of the right and best. Of late he had begun to feel that these qualities were a peculiar possession for himself, and he wanted to engross them.

The reading in the night did come. Dorothea in her young weariness had slept soon and fast: she was awakened by a sense of light, which seemed to her at first like a sudden vision of sunset after she had climbed a steep hill: she opened her eyes and saw her husband wrapped in his warm gown seating himself in the arm-chair near the fire-place where the embers were still glowing. He had lit two candles, expecting that Dorothea would awake, but not liking to rouse her by more direct means.

'Are you ill, Edward?' she said, rising immediately.

'I felt some uneasiness in a reclining posture. I will sit here for a time.' She threw wood on the fire, wrapped herself up, and said, 'You would like me to read to you?'

'You would oblige me greatly by doing so, Dorothea,' said Mr Casaubon, with a shade more meekness than usual in his polite manner. 'I am wakeful: my mind is remarkably lucid.'

'I fear that the excitement may be too great for you,' said Dorothea, remembering Lydgate's cautions.

'No, I am not conscious of undue excitement. Thought is easy.' Dorothea dared not insist, and she read for an hour or more on the same plan as she had done in the evening, but getting over the pages with more quickness. Mr Casaubon's mind was more alert, and he seemed to anticipate what was coming after a very slight verbal indication, saying, 'That will do - mark that' - or 'Pass on to the next head - I omit the second excursus on Crete.' Dorothea was amazed to think of the bird-like speed with which his mind was surveying the ground where it had been creeping for years. At last he said -

'Close the book now, my dear. We will resume our work to-morrow. I have deferred it too long, and would gladly see it completed. But you observe that the principle on which my selection is made, is to give adequate, and not disproportionate illustration to each of the theses

enumerated in my introduction, as at present sketched. You have perceived that distinctly, Dorothea?'

'Yes,' said Dorothea, rather tremulously. She felt sick at heart.

'And now I think that I can take some repose,' said Mr Casaubon. He laid down again and begged her to put out the lights. When she had lain down too, and there was a darkness only broken by a dull glow on the hearth, he said -

'Before I sleep, I have a request to make, Dorothea.'

'What is it?' said Dorothea, with dread in her mind.

'It is that you will let me know, deliberately, whether, in case of my death, you will carry out my wishes: whether you will avoid doing what I should deprecate, and apply yourself to do what I should desire.'

Dorothea was not taken by surprise: many incidents had been leading her to the conjecture of some intention on her husband's part which might make a new yoke for her. She did not answer immediately.

'You refuse?' said Mr Casaubon, with more edge in his tone.

'No, I do not yet refuse,' said Dorothea, in a clear voice, the need of freedom asserting itself within her; 'but it is too solemn - I think it is not right - to make a promise when I am ignorant what it will bind me to. Whatever affection prompted I would do without promising.'

'But you would use your own judgment: I ask you to obey mine; you refuse.'

'No, dear, no!' said Dorothea, beseechingly, crushed by opposing fears. 'But may I wait and reflect a little while? I desire with my whole soul to do what will comfort you; but I cannot give any pledge suddenly - still less a pledge to do I know not what.'

'You cannot then confide in the nature of my wishes?'

'Grant me till to-morrow,' said Dorothea, beseechingly.

'Till to-morrow then,' said Mr Casaubon.

Soon she could hear that he was sleeping, but there was no more sleep for her. While she constrained herself to lie still lest she should disturb him, her mind was carrying on a conflict in which imagination ranged its forces first on one side and then on the other. She had no

presentiment that the power which her husband wished to establish over her future action had relation to anything else than his work. But it was clear enough to her that he would expect her to devote herself to sifting those mixed heaps of material, which were to be the doubtful illustration of principles still more doubtful. The poor child had become altogether unbelieving as to the trustworthiness of that Key which had made the ambition and the labor of her husband's life. It was not wonderful that, in spite of her small instruction, her judgment in this matter was truer than his: for she looked with unbiassed comparison and healthy sense at probabilities on which he had risked all his egoism. And now she pictured to herself the days, and months, and years which she must spend in sorting what might be called shattered mummies, and fragments of a tradition which was itself a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins - sorting them as food for a theory which was already withered in the birth like an elfin child. Doubtless a vigorous error vigorously pursued has kept the embryos of truth a-breathing: the quest of gold being at the same time a questioning of substances, the body of chemistry is prepared for its soul, and Lavoisier is born. But Mr Casaubon's theory of the elements which made the seed of all tradition was not likely to bruise itself unawares against discoveries: it floated among flexible conjectures no more solid than those etymologies which seemed strong because of likeness in sound until it was shown that likeness in sound made them impossible: it was a method of interpretation which was not tested by the necessity of forming anything which had sharper collisions than an elaborate notion of Gog and Magog: it was as free from interruption as a plan for threading the stars together. And Dorothea had so often had to check her weariness and impatience over this questionable riddle-guessing, as it revealed itself to her instead of the fellowship in high knowledge which was to make life worthier! She could understand well enough now why her husband had come to cling to her, as possibly the only hope left that his labors would ever take a shape in which they could be given to the world. At first it had seemed that he wished to keep even her aloof from any close knowledge of what he was doing; but gradually the terrible stringency of human need - the prospect of a too speedy death -

And here Dorothea's pity turned from her own future to her husband's past - nay, to his present hard struggle with a lot which had grown out of that past: the lonely labor, the ambition breathing hardly under the pressure of self-distrust; the goal receding, and the heavier limbs; and now at last the sword visibly trembling above him! And had she not wished to marry him that she might help him in his life's labor? - But she had thought the work was to be something greater, which she could serve in devoutly for its own sake. Was it right, even to soothe his grief - would it be possible, even if she promised - to work as in a treadmill fruitlessly?

And yet, could she deny him? Could she say, 'I refuse to content this pining hunger?' It would be refusing to do for him dead, what she was almost sure to do for him living. If he lived as Lydgate had said he might, for fifteen years or more, her life would certainly be spent in helping him and obeying him.

Still, there was a deep difference between that devotion to the living and that indefinite promise of devotion to the dead. While he lived, he could claim nothing that she would not still be free to remonstrate against, and even to refuse. But - the thought passed through her mind more than once, though she could not believe in it - might he not mean to demand something more from her than she had been able to imagine, since he wanted her pledge to carry out his wishes without telling her exactly what they were? No; his heart was bound up in his work only: that was the end for which his failing life was to be eked out by hers.

And now, if she were to say, 'No! if you die, I will put no finger to your work' - it seemed as if she would be crushing that bruised heart.

For four hours Dorothea lay in this conflict, till she felt ill and bewildered, unable to resolve, praying mutely. Helpless as a child which has sobbed and sought too long, she fell into a late morning sleep, and when she waked Mr Casaubon was already up. Tantripp told her that he had read prayers, breakfasted, and was in the library.

'I never saw you look so pale, madam,' said Tantripp, a solid-figured woman who had been with the sisters at Lausanne.

'Was I ever high-colored, Tantripp?' said Dorothea, smiling faintly.

'Well, not to say high-colored, but with a bloom like a Chiny rose. But always smelling those leather books, what can be expected? Do rest a little this morning, madam. Let me say you are ill and not able to go into that close library.'

'Oh no, no! let me make haste,' said Dorothea. 'Mr Casaubon wants me particularly.'

When she went down she felt sure that she should promise to fulfil his wishes; but that would be later in the day - not yet.

As Dorothea entered the library, Mr Casaubon turned round from the table where he had been placing some books, and said -

'I was waiting for your appearance, my dear. I had hoped to set to work at once this morning, but I find myself under some indisposition,

probably from too much excitement yesterday. I am going now to take a turn in the shrubbery, since the air is milder.'

'I am glad to hear that,' said Dorothea. 'Your mind, I feared, was too active last night.'

'I would fain have it set at rest on the point I last spoke of, Dorothea. You can now, I hope, give me an answer.'

'May I come out to you in the garden presently?' said Dorothea, winning a little breathing space in that way.

'I shall be in the Yew-tree Walk for the next half-hour,' said Mr Casaubon, and then he left her.

Dorothea, feeling very weary, rang and asked Tantripp to bring her some wraps. She had been sitting still for a few minutes, but not in any renewal of the former conflict: she simply felt that she was going to say 'Yes' to her own doom: she was too weak, too full of dread at the thought of inflicting a keen-edged blow on her husband, to do anything but submit completely. She sat still and let Tantripp put on her bonnet and shawl, a passivity which was unusual with her, for she liked to wait on herself.

'God bless you, madam!' said Tantripp, with an irrepressible movement of love towards the beautiful, gentle creature for whom she felt unable to do anything more, now that she had finished tying the bonnet.

This was too much for Dorothea's highly-strung feeling, and she burst into tears, sobbing against Tantripp's arm. But soon she checked herself, dried her eyes, and went out at the glass door into the shrubbery.

'I wish every book in that library was built into a caticom for your master,' said Tantripp to Pratt, the butler, finding him in the breakfast-room. She had been at Rome, and visited the antiquities, as we know; and she always declined to call Mr Casaubon anything but 'your master,' when speaking to the other servants.

Pratt laughed. He liked his master very well, but he liked Tantripp better.

When Dorothea was out on the gravel walks, she lingered among the nearer clumps of trees, hesitating, as she had done once before, though from a different cause. Then she had feared lest her effort at fellowship should be unwelcome; now she dreaded going to the spot where she foresaw that she must bind herself to a fellowship from

which she shrank. Neither law nor the world's opinion compelled her to this - only her husband's nature and her own compassion, only the ideal and not the real yoke of marriage. She saw clearly enough the whole situation, yet she was fettered: she could not smite the stricken soul that entreated hers. If that were weakness, Dorothea was weak. But the half-hour was passing, and she must not delay longer. When she entered the Yew-tree Walk she could not see her husband; but the walk had bends, and she went, expecting to catch sight of his figure wrapped in a blue cloak, which, with a warm velvet cap, was his outer garment on chill days for the garden. It occurred to her that he might be resting in the summer-house, towards which the path diverged a little. Turning the angle, she could see him seated on the bench, close to a stone table. His arms were resting on the table, and his brow was bowed down on them, the blue cloak being dragged forward and screening his face on each side.

'He exhausted himself last night,' Dorothea said to herself, thinking at first that he was asleep, and that the summer-house was too damp a place to rest in. But then she remembered that of late she had seen him take that attitude when she was reading to him, as if he found it easier than any other; and that he would sometimes speak, as well as listen, with his face down in that way. She went into the summerhouse and said, 'I am come, Edward; I am ready.'

He took no notice, and she thought that he must be fast asleep. She laid her hand on his shoulder, and repeated, 'I am ready!' Still he was motionless; and with a sudden confused fear, she leaned down to him, took off his velvet cap, and leaned her cheek close to his head, crying in a distressed tone -

'Wake, dear, wake! Listen to me. I am come to answer.' But Dorothea never gave her answer.

Later in the day, Lydgate was seated by her bedside, and she was talking deliriously, thinking aloud, and recalling what had gone through her mind the night before. She knew him, and called him by his name, but appeared to think it right that she should explain everything to him; and again, and again, begged him to explain everything to her husband.

'Tell him I shall go to him soon: I am ready to promise. Only, thinking about it was so dreadful - it has made me ill. Not very ill. I shall soon be better. Go and tell him.'

But the silence in her husband's ear was never more to be broken.